



## My Life My Story



**ANTHONY**



**UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS**

# Anthony

It's not clear to me why anyone would want to read my story. There are many folks who lived through much more interesting times than I do. Experiences, good or bad are a part of life. We all do our best to cope with the reality of our existence. In the end, each of us have something to contribute to recorded history.

My disclaimer: When I tell a story about my experiences, especially events during my years in the Corps, I can't be sure of the details. Today, I am unsure if things happened the way I remember them. Perhaps it was someone else's rendition, I read about it, or I saw it in a movie. It's the best I can do.

I was born in central California in October 1944. Our family experienced an impoverished early existence. There were seven siblings when my mother became a single parent. She fled an abusive relationship and moved us to Hollister in 1947. There we lived in a woodshed until the rancher allowed us to move into his basement.



My eighth sibling was born in 1948 and soon after we moved into an army surplus tent barely large enough to accommodate us. After a few months, the county welfare department took notice and moved us into a larger tent with no floor. We were located on the outskirts of Gilroy next to the railroad tracks.



Here, next to the railroad tracks, I severed all ties with my biological father. Without going into details, he assaulted us while he was intoxicated; this made a lasting impression on my young mind.



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Sometime in 1948, my mother married a farmer. His ranch was not large, but big enough to support the lot of us. This was a marriage of convenience, but I would not understand this until much later. We lived with him for about three years. There, our youngest sibling was born. We enjoyed a stable life for about three years with Elvin. He was incredibly good to us, and I never forgot it. Elvin and our mother divorced.

We moved into the town of Gilroy. Most of my elementary education took place while living there. It was time to move again. We moved to San Jose, first into a basement, then to an apartment. Finally, my aunt loaned us enough money to purchase a home on the east side of town. We had finally arrived in a place we could call our own.

I was finally able to cultivate friendships that would last through my high school years. I attended James Lick High School and for the most part enjoyed the experience. I played trumpet in the orchestra and marching band, played basketball, was on the water polo team, and most importantly, was a league celebrity for my springboard diving. In 1962, we were the number one swim club in the United States, arguably in the world.

I was unable to appreciate the need for a good education while in high school. It made no sense to me. I noticed that the rich kids were in the college prep classes, and the rest of us were in the vocational classes. I guess, I figured that I was not college material. After graduation from high school, this concept would change.

I was able to get a job at a hamburger place immediately out of school. I also attended San Jose City College in the fall of 1962.



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I wanted to maximize my earning potential, and the only way to do that was with a good education. I found out over the next year or so that I was ill equipped to succeed in college. I was frustrated. Frustrated and unhappy with my prospects and with turmoil at home, I was looking for some way out.

In November 1963, our President was killed. Like many, I remember exactly where I was and what I did following this tragedy. Now, the combination of my frustrations and our President's assassination intensified my desire to run away. The only exit I could imagine was to join the Navy. In December 1963, I knocked on the door of the Navy recruiting office; they did not answer. A Marine NCO stood in the hallway. He suggested I wait for them in his office. Within an hour, I was on my way to becoming a Marine.

It was late January 1964 that I reported to MCRD San Diego. I can clearly recall stepping out of the bus in front of the receiving barracks. There were white footprints painted on the pavement in front of two wide doors. The shouting of the Drill Instructors bellowing in my ears was "scary." My thoughts immediately calculated the number of days I had to endure this torture, 1460 days until I would be free from this harassment. I asked myself, "How the hell did I get myself into this mess?" This phrase I would recite many times during the next four years.



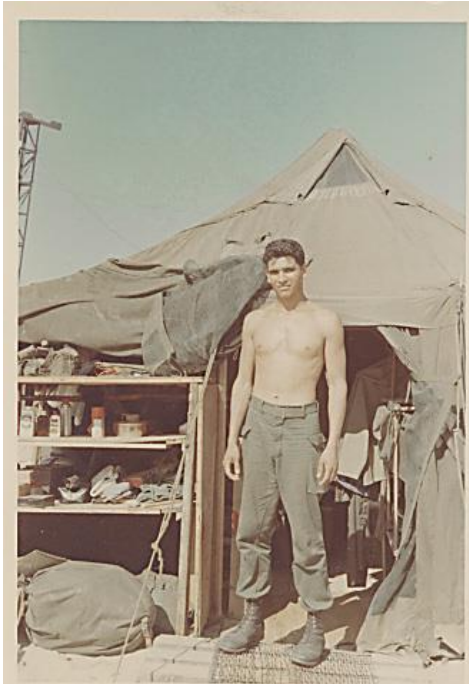
I did not mind the recruit training. I was physically fit and smart enough to stay out of trouble. I scored first in half of the tests and second in the remaining ones. I made E-2, but was passed over for honor guard status because, as I was told, I didn't fit the profile. This would be the first of what I perceived as a betrayal by the Corps. I was familiar with this type of treatment.





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My duty station was Camp Pendleton with the 7<sup>th</sup> Marines. I was assigned to motor transport, then transferred to radio communications. I was a radioman in an infantry outfit. That sounded cool until midyear 1965. We were informed the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment with all its associated support units was bound for Vietnam.



Later in 1965, we landed in Chu Lai, Vietnam via Okinawa. The beach was pristine and showed no evidence of warfare. “This was going to be a piece of cake,” we thought. We off loaded the ships and put up our tents; the smell of the waterproofing oils on the tents reminded me of my childhood. The first night, we experienced a minor typhoon which required us to stay up all night and hold down the tents to keep our equipment dry.

Within a week or so, we were engaged in the Battle of Chu Lai. This was when we recognized this was not going to be a piece of cake. We changed our tune, “If we make it back to the world, it’s all gravy.” I asked myself again, “How the hell did I get myself into this mess?”

A few months after arriving in country, we moved the HQ inland. There, we had a secure site where a club, church, PX, and other similar facilities could be built. The PX was where I purchased my first camera. I don’t remember the make, but it was a small “spy camera” no larger than three inches long and one inch wide. I could carry it into the bush.



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As time went on, I purchased a 35mm camera. I lost my original, but I still use the same model. This is where and when I became interested in photography. I used my camera extensively. Most of my images have not survived.

Prior to September 1966, I considered myself a good Marine. In times of duress, I reminded myself that many Marines came before me. They endured, some survived and some died. It was my duty to conduct myself as a Plutonic Marine. My last year or so, my evaluation was not as a Plutonic Marine.



There were a series of events which caused me to feel rejection, betrayal, and helplessness. I was helpless to do anything about it. I do not believe, I would have reenlisted in any case. I couldn't wait to finish my 1460 days.

During my time in the Corps, I adopted many complimentary behaviors: discipline, dedication, and planning are among those skills and behaviors. I recognized that folks with an education were giving orders while the rest of us did the work. I decided to get an education.

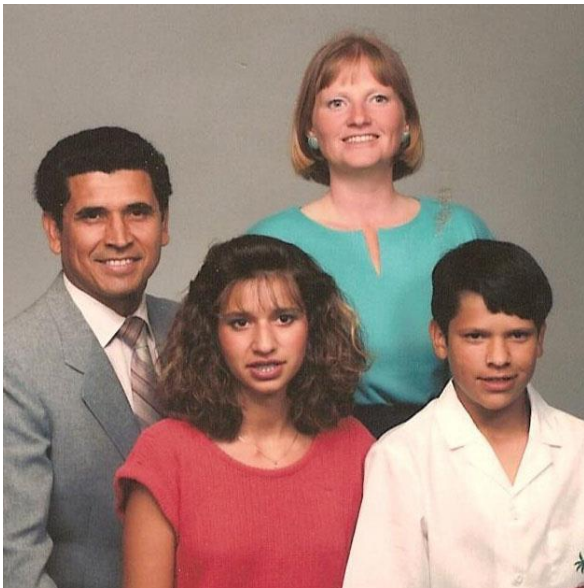
I was discharged as an E-5 in January 1968 and immediately matriculated into San Jose City College. This time college would be different; I had a purpose and the behaviors provided by the Corps. My college experience in 1962 and 1963 left me with an accumulation of W/F grades. I began in the most rudimentary English and mathematics courses available. I accepted this; it was my own doing.



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My goals at San Jose City College was to legitimately enroll in calculus and physics. I achieved those goals and transferred to San Jose State.

On August 5, 1969, Ginny and I were married. It was a Reno affaire: come to Reno, get married, go home, go to work that afternoon. We started off with twenty-seven dollars. As of May 2020, we have been married for fifty plus years. It's hard to believe someone could live with me for so long.



April was born in September 1970. Our son Gabe was born in March 1974. I worked full time, went to college full time, and did my best to provide for my family. Concurrently, I continued to improve my photographic skills. My photography skills were OK but needed serious improvement.

Armed with my newly acquired education, I entered the workforce. Middle management was not my first choice, but this was where I could earn a sufficient income to provide a comfortable lifestyle for my family. I enjoyed most of the positions I held and became proficient in a variety of skills: statistics, database design and management, basic programing, publication/documentation, manufacturing, organizational structure, etc.

In 1981, I returned to education by attending night classes at the University of San Francisco Extension program. Simultaneously, I created several companies; some were profitable, most were not. They included software, coffee and firewood ventures. I enjoyed the challenge and it kept me busy. Work provided us with a comfortable existence but fell short of insuring a reasonable retirement.



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Without a clear path to a “good” retirement, I invested in real estate. We worked hard and were lucky. Real estate provided the funds which allows us to enjoy our retirement.

I purchased my first digital camera about seventeen years ago. Photographically, this changed everything for me. It was so easy and inexpensive to capture images that I started “shooting” everything. I made it a point to photograph most of my extended family, and I quickly became known as the photographer in the family.

Early retirement had always been a goal, and I reached that goal at age fifty-seven. I spent my time taking care of our yard, investing in family endeavors, and renewing my interest in politics. I continued to take images of everything. I did not realize how much photography would play a role in my life, but I was about to find out.

When I returned to the United States after Vietnam in 1966, I had mental health difficulties. For a short while, I was dangerous to myself and others. I quickly adopted a coping skill which would stay with me for forty plus years. Alcoholism seemed to run in the family. Like many other Veterans, this was where I turned to quiet the unwanted emotions and memories.

My experience in South East Asia set in motion the trauma recognized as PTSD. My past is riddled with behaviors which can only be explained as a response to PTSD. This would change.

Some years ago, the effect of PTSD and denial overwhelmed me. I experienced a crisis episode which lead me to seek help at the VA Mental Health Facility in Reno. This was extremely difficult. Like so many other veterans with this disorder, we believe we are too strong and proud to seek help.





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The doctors were able to help me understand the disorder. I learned to watch for behaviors resulting from certain triggers, sublimation, and deficiencies in my social behavior which contribute to poor physical and mental health. I came to realize that there were many Veterans experiencing the same emotional stress. “Comforted” is not the proper word for how I felt, but it was “healthy” to know that I was not alone.

One goal given to me by my psychologist was to befriend one person. Initially, just casually, but with the hope to call him a friend. I found this impossible and began to isolate and to concentrate on photography. I did not have to interact with folks while I was behind the camera. I worked tirelessly to develop my skills with the camera.

My time in the Corps taught me how to stick to something and see it through, to focus. I studied and practiced for hours each day until I knew my camera like I knew my rifle. The camera, just like my rifle, kept me alive.

Ginny read about a seminar being held at the GSR which was presented by Veterans Hospital; the topic was PTSD. At first, I did not want to go but later, I gave in to Ginny’s request. There, I met with an individual associated with Recreation Therapy. I was unaware of its existence. During our conversation, I learned that photography was one of the activities supported by Recreation Therapy. I said, “Count me in.”

I was called to my first photography meeting. There were two members of this loosely formed group. I was anxious for the opportunity to share and learn with these photographers. By this time, I had become well versed in many photographic techniques. I did not realize that the “book learning” had refined my skills such that I am a photographer and not a casual picture collector. I still had a lot to learn. Photography brought us together, and it provided a common interest which facilitated the possibility of friendship. We remain good friends.



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I was reluctant to share or confide in anyone, but that changed. We had more than photography in common; we were veterans. I could talk about my issues with PTSD and became unafraid to test the relationship waters. Before I knew it, I had two friends. Our meetings were social as much as they were about photography. We could discuss physical and mental health issues. I gradually became confident enough to allow folks to know my shortcomings as well as my strengths.

Over time, the group grew to about three dozen, a dozen or so who are active members. I am driven to recruit as many veterans as I can to our group. When I hear of an eligible veteran, I go into recruit mode. It didn't take long to form a solid core of photographers. We decided to name our group the Reno Veteran Photography Group.

The RVPG members pulled me out of isolation and gave me the opportunity to express myself. I have learned something from each member: not just photography, but much more. A good friend passed a few years ago. I only knew him for a short while, but Ed taught me that I could laugh. I didn't laugh much before Ed, and I haven't done much since.

The RVPG decided to produce a photographic panel for the VA National Art Festival which is held each year. After much debate and coordination, we completed the project and entered it into the local contest. We won first prize; we were the only entry in that category. We were proud of our panel, and I guess, others liked it too. We were given permission to construct a full-size collage. With carpenters help, we produced an art piece named, *Proud to Be Reno*, which hangs on the wall adjacent to the pharmacy in the Reno VA Hospital. We are thankful for our forward-looking leadership at the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System.

We became a collection of veterans with greatly improved photographic skills and wanted to use those skills to promote healing.



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We passionately believe that through the arts, one can improve their quality of life. I know this is true because it's my ongoing experience. I must take this opportunity to thank each member and our Recreation Therapy coordinator for the gifts they have given me: A life worth living.

In our willingness to show off our skills, the Reno Veteran Photography Group became involved in a Women Veteran project. *Through Our Eyes, The Women Veteran's Experience* became a fun and exciting project. Unexpectedly, I was asked to be the photographer for the project. I was unsure if I could do it, not for lack of skills, but for the appropriateness of a male veteran composing a female veterans' program. My concerns were doused by wiser folks than I am, so we began the project.



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I have never enjoyed any project more than this. I met folks who were from each branch of the military, enlisted and officers. Each photo shoot was a joy and, I believe, the veterans had as much fun as I did. There were fifteen women veterans, and I came to learn that the photo shoot was the easy part of the project.

Now, that I had the images of the veterans, I needed to process them for printing. The “committee” was starting the project from scratch, and we were unsure of what the final product should look like. Much time was spent looking at drafts of potential posters. I enjoyed the process, partially because I was able to show off the skills that I had worked so hard to develop.

Once we found a layout, I began to process the images and prepare them for printing. This part was simple, but it took some time. The veterans did not have the opportunity to view the posters prior to printing, however, they were instrumental in choosing the image they preferred from the photo shoot.

I was a little anxious when the posters were delivered to the hospital. It wasn't due to my lack of confidence. I knew the photography and photoshop work was good, but this project was extremely important, and I did not want to fail the committee or the women veterans. As it turned out, everyone liked the posters; and I was able to breathe a sigh of relief. Most believe this exhibit a success.

I remain available to provide whatever skills I have developed since becoming a patient at the Reno VA hospital. I now realize that photography is an important vehicle for healing psychological wounds. I often tell my buddies, “When I feel depressed, distraught or have thoughts of harming myself, I pick up my camera, march out the door and start shooting.”





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I am a photographer and ceased being a victim of memories past. I am unsure if the VA mental health program and Recreation Therapy prevented my suicide, but I am sure they gave me the ability to experience a life worth living.

